

The Animal Milk Mandate in Our Nation's Schools Is Making Kids Sick

Dairy industry monopoly in our nutrition-assistance programs persists despite millions of kids having lactose intolerance

WASHINGTON, D.C., UNITED STATES, January 9, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Of all the industries that the U.S. Department of Agriculture boosts with a vast array of subsidies and support programs, the dairy industry may be at the top of the heap. For decades, our federal government has been working to promote dairy consumption well beyond the commodity's natural reach and appeal. While milk, in the original designs of nature, is produced by moms to speed the physiological development of infants, the USDA treats cows' milk as an everyday staple for people of every age and every ethnic background.



Robotic systems like this make it even more efficient for Big Dairy to flood the market with unwanted milk.

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*Wayne Pacelle, president,
Animal Wellness Action*

The United States collaborates with dairy trade groups to manage the Dairy Checkoff Program — which taxes all producers and gathers up nearly \$400 million a year to promote the product and to finance the industry's trade associations. But the government's most important assist for the dairy industry may be its role in keeping milk ubiquitous in the nation's nutrition assistance programs. For the 30 million kids participating in the National School Lunch Program, there is no choice when it comes to nutritious beverages. The dairy industry has achieved a de facto monopoly in the schools.

Our nutrition assistance programs mandate that a carton

of cows' milk be placed on a student's lunch tray — whether the child wants the milk or not. The government denies school districts reimbursement for the costs of the entire breakfast and lunch offerings unless the school places cows' milk on the trays of every student receiving

nutrition assistance.

Call it the U.S.'s milk mandate. And in 2019, the agency bought up a billion dollars' worth of milk from dairy producers for the NSLP.

Lactose-Intolerant Kids Have No Choice and No Voice

Here's one big problem with the NSLP program: Many of our school children cannot healthfully consume milk and its derivatives because of lactose intolerance (LI), a condition that prevents their bodies from fully digesting the sugar (lactose) found in milk and other dairy products. This inability results in undigested lactose sitting in the lower intestinal tract where it can cause diarrhea, nausea, cramps, bloating and, in severe cases, vomiting.

The incidence of LI is dominant among children and all people of color, with up to 80 percent of African Americans and Native Americans, 65 percent of Latinos, and over 90 percent of Asian Americans suffering the often-incapacitating effects of LI. The National Institutes of Health reports the majority of all people have a reduced ability to digest lactose after infancy, and LI "is also very common in people of West African, Arab, Jewish, Greek and Italian descent."

Many kids do not understand that they are getting sick from milk. But even kids denied a proper classroom learning experience because of LI-induced discomfort or illness are smart enough to understand that milk is a problem for them in the lunchroom. Call it "children's intuition."

According to the USDA's own findings, 29 percent of the cartons of milk served in our schools are thrown in the garbage unwanted and unopened (Fox, Gearan E. School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, 2019). Another study found that kids are pouring 45 million gallons of milk down the proverbial drain each year.

For kids, spilled milk isn't an accident — it's a survival strategy. Giving millions of kids a product that causes stomach pain or even vomiting should not be an exclusive staple of our nutrition programs.

Recently, the USDA has proposed changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to put more healthy offerings of fruits and vegetables onto the tables of struggling families and allow for more soy-based yogurt and cheese alternatives. That's progress given that the point of our nutrition assistance programs is to give needy individuals foods that are palatable and nourishing.

But while the USDA is finally turning some attention to diversity and nutrition in the household, it is failing to take similar action in our lunchrooms. It's same old, same old in our schools.

Just Give the Kids a Soymilk Option

[Animal Wellness Action](#), the [Center for a Humane Economy](#) and [Switch4Good](#) have joined together to undertake a campaign urging the USDA to provide kids with access to soy milk. Other plant-based milks don't have the same nutritional content as cow's milk, but soy milk does, and that's recognized in in the most recent formulation of the American Dietary Guidelines

We've written a letter with 28 signatories, including National Urban League and the National Action Network, to the USDA's recently formed Equity Commission asking it to investigate and provide recommendations to the Secretary to address a civil rights problem in our schools. These organizations are asking the USDA to stop punishing schools if they wish to provide kids with a food option that doesn't make them sick.

In October 2022, 31 House members, led by Reps. Troy Carter, D-La., Nanette Barragán, D-Calif., and Ted Lieu, D-Calif. — all prominent leaders within the Congressional Black Caucus, Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and Asian and Pacific Islander Caucus — wrote to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and urged him to delay no longer in remedying the problem.

"It's time that our school lunches reflect the reality that many of our children, including the majority of Black, Asian, and Hispanic kids, are lactose intolerant," wrote Rep. Carter. "By providing a nutritionally-equivalent substitute such as soy milk, we can help keep our kids healthier, full, and decrease food waste."

Vilsack may indeed be disinclined to hear the message, given that he was the CEO of U.S. Dairy Export Council before he joined the Biden Administration. In the private sector, he was paid a million dollars a year by the dairy industry to promote its product, including boosting exports to minority communities in Asia, Africa, and South America, where lactose tolerance rates are similarly astronomical. The work of the U.S. Dairy Export Council is funded through Dairy Management, Inc. and the check-off program.

Disregarding the Animals Who Produce the Milk

Hyper-promotion of milk in the schools has led to hyper-production on the farm. That effect on the farm makes the USDA's promotions of milk an animal-welfare issue, too.

Dairy cows have been engineered to produce milk at levels and rates that are unsuited for health. Just decades ago, a dairy cow produced 433.9 gallons of milk per year. But with selective breeding for hyperproduction, a Holstein on an industrialized farm now produces 2,695 gallons annually to keep up with the demand that our government and the industry have manufactured. That means that a cow once producing 3,621 pounds of milk a year — a remarkable biological output by any measure — is now producing an astounding 22,500 pounds. That unbelievable level of production taxes her system and leads to an array of health problems — from inflammation of the udders to foot and leg problems resulting from the massive body mass they must carry.

Despite a normal life span of up to 20 years, dairy cows are physically worn out after four to seven years. Once deemed commercially unproductive, they are sent to slaughter for low-grade beef and pet food. Most of the “downer cows” that are presented at slaughter plants are spent dairy cows. The male calves don’t make it to the downer stage; they are killed at birth or recycled into the meat industry.

It’s past time to revisit a school milk mandate that was first passed in 1954, at the same time our children were being subjected to the “duck and cover” drills that had them hiding under desks with their hands over their heads to protect themselves from nuclear attacks. We got rid of those inane exercises in 1962, yet even with all the findings made from nutritional and public health studies over the many years and the emergence of alternative, plant-based beverages, seven decades later our government is still holding onto an arcane milk mandate in schools.

The “Justice for All” posters that the agency requires participating public schools to display in their lunchrooms are worse than empty rhetoric. They are a false promise, as the USDA presides over a nutrition assistance program that makes many millions of kids of color sick and denies them safe and health-promoting options.

In the private sector, plant-based milks account for 16 percent of sales of fluid milk. But that percentage in our schools covers just north of zero percent. That’s grossly unfair and it’s skewed. Kids are suffering not just as a matter of well-being but also educational experience. There’s an easy fix here: Follow the government science that tells us soymilk is a nutritionally equivalent product.

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